

MARRIAGE AMONG /KUNG BUSHMEN

571 we were unable to find a precise translation of /*ǃassi* but think it connotes the *we* as
619 distinct from the *they* and has an overtone of something good and safe. The phrase is
621 an opposite of *ju dǃole*. *Dǃole* means strange or harmful or bad—evidently synonyms to
the /Kung.

602 Because there were so many kinship ties among the people and because they have
621 a system (the name relationship—to be mentioned later) by which they apply kin
[608] terms to persons who are not consanguineous relatives or affines, I wondered for
a time if we should find that the people who call themselves *ju ǃassi* comprised a
kin group of the type which Murdock calls a *deme*.¹ A *deme* is bilateral and endogamous,
Murdock says, 'comparable to the sib both in size and in the traditional rather than demonstrable bonds of kinship which unite the members'. Though the
Nyae Nyae region has the elements of a *deme*, I am convinced that it does not constitute,
strictly speaking, an organized kin group of this type, of which the people are conscious
as a social form. The endogamy of the region is customary and preferred, but not required
by a social rule, and it is not from the group of people as a whole who are *ju ǃassi* that
social regulation derives.

Marriage regulations: the incest taboo and its expression in avoidances

582 Marriages are forbidden in /Kung social organization on one basis only. That
835 basis is incest. In common with nearly all mankind (excepting, of course, the Pharaohs
and a few other rare examples), the /Kung incest taboo prohibits marriage or sexual
relations between Fa and Da, Mo and So, Br and Si. The incest taboo is extended
beyond the nuclear family to certain additional categories of persons, and marriage
with them is also rigorously forbidden by /Kung social law.

[842] The /Kung did not express the belief that in-breeding *per se* produces inferior offspring
and must for that reason be avoided. Although they believe that in conception the semen
unites with menstrual blood, their language does not use the image of blood as ours does.
[827] They do not think of relatives as having the same blood or any physical substance
in common, actually or by way of figure of speech to represent inheritable characteristics,
in so far as we know, and do not think that common inheritance is somehow what makes
it wrong to marry close kin.

The thought that incest has been avoided by mankind because it would be exceedingly
disruptive to the internal cohesion of the nuclear family comes to the mind of the analyst
of social forms but not to the minds of /Kung informants. And no mention was made
of the obvious social advantage of marrying outside the nuclear family and thereby weaving
a supporting web of kinship with many other families and bands.

The /Kung feel a deep, internalized, pervading horror of incest which they do not
try to explain. Incest with parent, offspring, or sibling is unthinkable. 'Only dogs
do that—not men.' 'It would be madness (*di*).' 'It would be dangerous, like going
up to a lion.' Many refused to speak with me about such 'bad things'.

571 the Bushmen were saying of themselves, in effect,
619 'We are not animals, we are human beings', a connotation we did not discover in the thinking
621 of the /Kung themselves. Ledimo, our chief interpreter, also a *Chwana*, said the phrase had the connotation
of 'perfect persons' and that 'clean' and 'empty'

were aspects of the word /*ǃassi*, he thought. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas paraphrased it in the title of her book, *The Harmless People* (Knopf, New York; Martin Secker & Warburg, London, 1959).

¹ Murdock, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

/159 cont. /

278 Poisoned arrows shot into the chest and abdomen are de-
752 scribed as unconditionally deadly. Arrow wounds on extremities,
[411] as well as very superficial ones, are supposed to be curable under
certain circumstances if immediate help is provided.

[751] There is no inoculation against arrow poison.

●[827] An older Auin suffering from badly inflamed eyes attributed
this illness to an arrow wound he had received many years
earlier. His statement, of course, cannot be verified.

165 Malaria is endemic and annually exacts many lives. The
number of cases resulting in death was especially great in 1908-
1909. Whole settlements are supposed to have died out. Epidemics
were unknown even to the "oldest people."

Venereal diseases are blessings of civilization, but evidently
not yet widespread.

731 Famine actually prevails every year toward the end of the
dry season, especially if the preceding rainy season has been
poor. During this time, almost all the Auin are emaciated to
skeletons. Death by hunger is not supposed to /160/ occur.
After all, the Bushman always finds something to eat, even if it
is only grass seeds.

756 The so-called doctors decidedly possess great experience
in medical matters, which, however, does not prevent them
from practicing considerable charlatanism (see Section T).

W. Time Reckoning, Astronomy

805 The day is divided according to the position of the sun.
Certain time segments are indicated with great exactitude
according to the position of the sun. If one asks a Bushman,
"How far is it to the watering place?" he will point to the
place in the sky that the sun will have reached by the time one
gets there.

The concept of the month is known (gnui, "month").

The relation of the solar year to lunar months is unknown.

The Auin divides up the year, for which, incidentally, he
has no definite, but rather only a very vague concept, as
follows:

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[20 cont.]

101 the half-breed Bushmen, the Otjituo group. The Gam supposed-
 131 ly dwell in the region west of the Omatako valley from
 Okanakasewa to Omambonde. The most serious complaints are
 [648] lodged against the western group, which, in the opinion of the
 [631] District Office, is for the most part under a single head chief,
 the notorious Namagorub, and is called !Kung-au (that is, !Kung
 people) by the other Bushmen. The Karakuwisa chiefs, Gnani
 and Ma, both crippled, are worth mentioning, and further, the
 leaders of the burglars of Blockfontein, Gachu and his brother
 Tamburi; no one, however, has as much power as the notori-
 ous Namagorub."

According to Vedder, the Bushman tribe of the Masi-
 [197] Keren live in the forests south of the Otjimpolo Veld. They do
 [342] not understand the !Kung language; they live communally in
 [301] large rectangular houses and make incisions in the upper thigh
 ● [827] in order to be able to run better. Their arrows have large iron
 [411] points that are not poisoned.

2. On their Character

157 In character, the Bushmen differ among themselves just
 as much as the members of any other people. The various types
 of disposition already point to this fact. In view of the relatively
 brief period that I was able to spend with the individual Bush-
 men, I do not want to give too much significance to individual
 characteristics. The character of a people, if one can speak
 of such, [21] manifests itself in the average conventional or tra-
 ditional kind of reaction in different situations, and, in spite of
 the physically conditioned differences in character, this kind of
 reaction nonetheless displays a certain broad uniformity.

[114] Since among the other Bushman tribes my observations
 were less detailed, I shall report everything worthwhile that I
 observed here.

When he is confronted with something new, the Bush-
 man at first acts relatively uninterested. He has little curiosity.
 On the other hand, two !Kung Bushmen did once demand of me
 a detailed explanation of the motor, and they listened patiently
 to my account. When an American once gave a phonograph
 concert, they listened to it with obvious pleasure, but none of

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[38 cont.]

412 Fig. 4. Wooden Mortars of the !Kung. (1/4 natural size [as shown
415 in the original text]).

Fig. 5. Wooden Vessels of the !Kung.

Fig. 6. Large Wooden Bowl of the !Kung (probably imported from the north — Museum of Ethnology, Berlin, III, D. 2158).

Fig. 7. Pestle and Digging Stick of the !Kung (greatly reduced).

Fig. 8. (1) Digging Stick with !Kwe; (2) Veld Hoe (Museum of Ethnology, Berlin, III, D. 1278 and 1497).

301 lengthen them. Some people possess such a great number of these chains that they cover the entire forehead. Children often wear small rectangular pendants, and women have large, medallion-like round ones that are worn like a diadem in the middle of the forehead. Little chains of small ostrich egg beads up to five centimeters long are worn as ear pendants. Children are also given armbands and anklebands made of ostrich egg beads. Brass beads from ancient times are rare and are worn exclusively as hair pendants, as are copper beads. Glass beads are not greatly valued, and only blue ones are worn, if any. On the other hand, beads made from aromatic wood are common. Longer chains of alternating wood and ostrich egg beads and worn in the hair are insignia of the female doctors. The men have tight little leather straps [327] at the wrists and ankles, which probably serve to strengthen the [411] musculature in running and using the bow. In addition, they have a few armbands of brass or iron. Every man and woman wears a string around the neck, which has one or two appetite sticks (see [777] below) and various talismans attached at the front. Finally, a little horn containing various kinds of medicine is worn around the neck by many of the men. The younger women and girls [303] usually also possess a tortoise shell powder box of the kind described below for the Dama. Body painting is scarcely practiced; [302] concerning tattooing, see page 56. The children occasionally wear armbands that they make themselves with grass or various fruits.

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304 3. The third and most curious is a manner of tattooing which I should like to designate as the antelope tattoo, a kind of inoculation that I have seen in no other native African tribe. This type of tattoo is used only by males and consists of the following:

[827] Through parallel incisions little pieces of antelope flesh, especially gemsbok flesh, are placed under the skin of male children, with the idea that the child thus inoculated will have the speed of the antelopes in running. The incisions are most commonly made on the buttocks, but they are also to be found on the chest, abdomen, and back.

757 One also commonly finds scars all over the body from blood-letting incisions "to draw off" illnesses.

142 Viewed from above, the head shows no peculiarities, although dolichocephaly does not seem to me to be as marked among the Bushmen as it is among the Bantu Negroes. The protuberance at the back of the head is so little developed that it can scarcely be felt on most individuals.

The profile view of the face permits one to recognize a clear alveolar prognath. In the case of most individuals the upper lip in the profile view extends beyond the tip of the nose. The edge of hair around the fairly straight forehead runs in an even curve from one ear to the other.

The bones of the eyebrow arches protrude sharply, while the forehead bulge is only slightly developed.

The cheekbones with the widely-projecting zygomatic arches form prominences jutting out sharply in the temporal and cheek region.

142 Most Bushmen show a striking prominence of the parotid gland region, which in the case of some individuals swells out so that it
147 is actually hemispherical. I was unable to determine whether the swelling is caused more by hypertrophy of the parotid gland or by a particularly strong development of the chewing musculature. This swelling of the parotid gland region is, I believe, not a racial peculiarity of the Bushmen, but rather a consequence of their way of life which necessitates a root diet requiring very heavy use of the chewing apparatus. At any rate, I observed the same peculiarity among the Herero, who for a long time were dependent upon veld food.

N/OW

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N/ow of the /Kung is something which influences weather, bringing rain if it is 'good' *n/ow*, or cold if it is 'bad' *n/ow*. Precisely what *n/ow* consists of was never made explicit. Nothing about it can be seen. One knows of its existence, the /Kung say, by observing its effects upon the weather.

N/ow exists in all human beings, the /Kung believe, and in certain big animals, namely: giraffe, eland, gemsbok, kudu, hartebeest, and wildebeest. For the sake of brevity I shall refer to these animals as the *n/ow* animals. Small animals do not have *n/ow*, according to the /Kung. We wanted to learn why, but the /Kung could only tell us that they were so created. Steenbok have positively no *n/ow* at all. Some informants claimed that duikers had none, others said that duikers' *n/ow* was undeveloped. Informants were also uncertain about springbok. There are very few springbok in the region and informants said they killed them so seldom that they had not observed whether or not they had *n/ow*. Possibly other large animals would be found to have *n/ow* if the question were further pursued.¹ There was no disagreement among /Kung informants about other things; no other things have *n/ow*—not earth itself, nor vegetation nor other objects on earth; not water, clouds, rain, thunder or lightning, nor heavenly bodies. Not even the two Gods themselves have *n/ow* in them, neither the great one who lives in the eastern sky, nor his namesake (his *iguma*) who lives in the western sky, both of whom bear the names Huwe, Hishi, and ≠Gao/na, our informants told us.

N/ow gets into a human being in the womb. Exactly how this happens informants could not tell us. It was our impression that they were not hiding information, they seemed willing enough to talk about *n/ow* and said it was not dangerous or harmful in any way to speak freely about it. We think they simply did not know. One informant said, 'The child gets the *n/ow* in the womb and is born with it.' Another said, 'The *n/ow* is created in the womb.' Another said, 'The great Creator gives the *n/ow* and taught the people to do the things they do about it. He made all things and made all things to be known.' The *n/ow* acquired in the womb remains in a person all his life.

Some persons get a 'good' rain-bringing *n/ow*, others get a 'bad' cold-bringing *n/ow*. When we wanted to learn how this happened we were told that 'When the mother's uterine fluid flows into the ground, it makes a *n/ow* in the child which brings rain or a *n/ow* which does not bring rain'.

The mother has no voluntary control over this, nor has anyone else; and there is nothing, like medicine or magic, spell or ceremony, which can be used to cause the *n/ow* to be one kind or the other. Furthermore, the child does not inherit a good or bad *n/ow* from his mother or father or any ancestors. The philosophy, lore, or belief about the question of what causes the *n/ow* to be one or the other kind, whatever it may have been in the past, seems not to be known now with clarity or detail.

Two verbs were used in connexion with *n/ow*: to ≠gani and to //ghui. The /Kung say that the mother has ≠gani(ed) the child if it gets a good *n/ow* and has //ghui(ed) it if

¹ Miss Lucy Lloyd (*A Short Account of Further Bushman Material, Third Report*, London, 1889, p. 19) mentions that a Bushman informant, Dial-kwain by name, who worked with her and with Dr. Bleek before his death, and who came from the Katkop Mountains, south of the Orange River, told

her that 'A baboon, when killed, resembles a man, in "making cloud"'. No more information was given in the report, but the concept of 'making cloud' suggests that possibly the now extinct or almost extinct Cape Bushmen had a belief which may have resembled in some ways the concept of *n/ow*.

192 it gets a bad *n/ow*. We heard the words used constantly in connexion with *n/ow* and
 827 rain and cold, but know of the use of only one of them in another connexion. The
 /Kung say that a child '||ghui(s) its name' if its teeth come late. We do not know pre-
 cisely how to translate the words and hope that a linguist will some time throw more
 light on them.

821 ≠Toma, one of our informants, pondering on the question of how the *n/ow*
 827 comes to be of one kind or the other in a person, said he thought the child's position
 843 in the womb and whether the child had long or short legs might have something to
 do with it, but he was not sure of this, and knew no more to tell us. A caul or a
 breech-birth does not make the *n/ow* good or bad, he thought. Other informants
 [845] thought that severely deformed infants or twins might possibly be more likely than
 847 others to get a bad *n/ow*, but they too were uncertain. (Possibly this is because de-
 formed infants and the weaker one of twins are killed at birth by /Kung mothers, so
 there is little occasion to think about the *n/ow* of such children.)

821 It is discovered what kind of *n/ow* a child has by observing the weather at the time
 787 of its birth or soon after. If it rains the people believe the *n/ow* of the child has brought
 the rain and are sure the *n/ow* is good. If water should freeze when the child was born
 or soon after, the child's *n/ow* would be known to be bad. Should the weather con-
 tinue in its normal seasonal course and no great extreme or notable change occur,
 the child's *n/ow* will be thought to be probably of the rain-bringing or cold-bringing
 kind according to the type of weather which prevailed; but if the weather is extreme
 at the time of the birth there is a feeling of certainty about the kind of *n/ow* the child
 has acquired, as the /Kung believe the effect of the *n/ow* was clearly observable.

At death as well as at birth the *n/ow* of a human being influences the weather. A /Kung
 told us that his *n/ow* had brought heavy rain when he was born and that everyone knew
 he had a rain-bringing *n/ow*. He said his mother, who lived at some distance from
 where he lived, noticed the weather and, if rain came at an unusual time or was un-
 usually heavy, she feared he had died and that his *n/ow* was causing the rain to come.

821 *N/ow* is said to exist in the bodies of human beings (presumably everywhere in
 826 them). Informants mentioned it particularly as associated with uterine fluid at the
 [827] time of birth and with the urine and hair of humans.

Hair is associated with clouds by the /Giwke Bushmen in the Bechuanaland Pro-
 tectorate, with whom we worked in 1955. They have a myth, told to us by the
 [773] old headman, Oukwane, which says that God, whose name there is Pisiboro, and
 who is their one God, tore the black, black hair from his head and threw it into the
 sky to make the rain clouds.

775 In *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*,¹ Dr. Bleek and Lucy Lloyd record a belief about
 821 death, collected in 1875 in the Katkop dialect from the informant Dia/kwain, which
 826 refers to hair and clouds. We quote the statement:

The hair of our head will resemble clouds, when we die, when we in this manner make
 clouds. These things are those which resemble clouds; and we think that (they) are clouds.
 We, who do not know, we are those who think in this manner, that (they) are clouds. We,
 who know, when we see that they are like this, we know that (they) are a person's clouds;
 (that they) are the hair of his head. We, who know, we are those who think thus, while we
 feel that we seeing recognize the clouds, how the clouds do in this manner form themselves.

¹ Bleek, W. H. L., and Lloyd, L. C., *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, London, 1911, pp. 399-401.

The Fire

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know, but Gai became embarrassed and said gravely that ¹²⁴₈₂₅ Pishiboro put that system there for reproduction and he alone knew how it worked.

Ukwane then said that he would explain instead, because ²²¹₈₃₁ he was an old man. Gai could not speak of sex in front of ⁷⁸⁴₈₂₆ women because it was both improper and dangerous and ⁸⁸⁸₁₂₄ would weaken his power to hunt, but Ukwane was too old ¹²⁴ for hunting and, besides, was past the age when many of the ¹²⁴ tabus concerning sex applied to him. Old Bushmen understand everything better anyway, young Bushmen say.

Ukwane knew a great deal. He named every major part, ¹²⁴₈₂₅ inside and out, of the animal, even naming the major veins and arteries that lead to and from the heart. We were not surprised to find that Bushmen, who prefer to be specific rather than general when dealing with minute things, distinguish more exterior parts of the body than we do. They have names, for example, for the inside of the elbow and the back of the knee. The *leg* of an animal means the hind leg, the front leg is the *arm*, and these are called by the same names as the arm and leg of human beings. Birds, too, fly with their arms and land on their legs, but I never could discover what insects do.

Ukwane went on to explain the various systems of the body, saying in the case of the urogenital system that liquid, which was "the little springboks," ran from the testicles into the kidneys, then down again and out the penis. He stuck to this version, too, even when Bill suggested that it might be otherwise. This does not mean that Bushmen think that urine ^[842] causes conception, for they recognize the role of semen, believing that it unites with the menstrual blood of the mother to form a child.

Ukwane understood the course of food and water through ¹²⁴₈₂₇ the digestive system, but said that food and water spread out

124 like sweat to all the body. He did not understand what the
● 827 lungs did, or that air went into them, or that air went through
the trachea. Breathing, said Ukwane, is air going down into
the stomach, where it makes belches. Ukwane did not know
about the circulation of the blood, believing that blood ebbs
and flows, nor did he recognize pulses in the body except the
pulse at the V of the throat, noticeable in people who wear
little clothing, which is known as "the place of the heart."

124 The cold night had come, and Ukwane in the frosty grass
826 was shivering, yet he sat for an hour keeping his patience,
putting his hands into the cold blood of the springbok to
trace veins to their source, prefacing all his answers with posi-
tive, qualifying remarks. "I am an old man," he would say,
"and I know that the diaphragm separates the heart and lungs
from the stomach," or "I am Ukwane, and I know that when
the heart is gone the animal cannot live, or a person either,
because the heart is that animal's life."

857 As the dissection and the conversation went on, the three
526 young boys, joined occasionally by Nhwakwe, the baby,
played games all the time, creeping in between the adults to
warm themselves by the fire and by the heat of bodies when
they could stand the cold no longer. If you wear no clothing
your skin is sensitive to very slight changes of temperature,
and even the warmth of someone sitting beside you or the
heat radiated by a few coals makes a lot of difference. When
the young boys were thawed they would again leap into the
darkness to play some more. They played a game of horse
and rider, in which one boy would leap astride another boy
and ride without holding on while the other boy would stag-
ger forward as fast as he could. In a moment, both would
fall, jump up again, hitch up their loincloths, and resume the
game, only this time the horse would jump on the back of